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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/b11659>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-169904>

Book Section

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Sobral Mourao, Ana (2017). Trenches of the mind: rap music in Angola and the (re-)construction of national identity. In: Sobral Mourao, Ana; Macedo, Tânia; Pantoja, Selma; Phaf-Rheinberger, Ineke. *Literatura e outras artes: construção da memória em Angola e Moçambique*. Bern: Peter Lang, 123-154.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3726/b11659>

Trenches of the Mind: Rap music in Angola and the (re-)construction of national identity

Introduction: „Angola moving forward, revolution“

For a few weeks in October 2015, just one month before Angola celebrated its 40 years of independence from Portuguese colonial rule, considerable international media attention was poured over Luaty Beirão, a political activist and one of Angola's most prominent rappers. Beirão had gone on a hunger strike in September, and his health situation was quickly deteriorating. In prison since June 2015 alongside 14 other activists, and still awaiting trial, a bedridden and emaciated Beirão received visits from EU representatives (from the UK, Sweden, Spain and Portugal), as well as from the Portuguese ambassador in Angola. Several demonstrations were organized in Lisbon; Amnesty International started an online campaign for the immediate release of the political prisoners in Angola; and in the Angolan capital Luanda, a vigil was taken up in front of the Sagrada Familia Church, under the permanent pressure and persecution from the police. The Portuguese magazine *Expresso*, a major media outlet in that country, released a special issue dedicated exclusively to Luaty Beirão, featuring a close shot of the artist on the cover page with the caption „An improbable hero“, and including a contribution from one of Angola's most renowned exiled authors, José Eduardo Agualusa, himself a vociferous critic of the Angolan regime¹. Beyond the Portuguese-speaking world, Beirão and the other political prisoners were featured in articles in *The Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Foreign Affairs*, among others. In the midst of an economic crisis, Angola, sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest oil producer and third-largest economy, found itself in a considerable political quagmire².

Luaty Beirão, aka Ikonoklasta or Brigadeiro Matafrakus – as he is known to hip hop fans – had attracted the attention of Angolan authorities at least as early as March 2011, when he went up on stage at the packed Cine Atlântico, one of Luanda's most prestigious music venues, to sing his infamous theme „Kamikaze Angolano“, in which he claims to be prepared to die for political change:

¹ E – A Revista do Expresso, 16.10.2015. <http://expresso.sapo.pt/Capas/2015-10-16-Um-heroi-improvavel-na-Revista-E> (accessed 02.10.2016).

² „Since June 2014, oil prices have plummeted nearly 60 percent, and the dos Santos regime, which is highly dependent on extraction, is now struggling to pay the bills, continue its infrastructure spending, and buy off key constituencies. Beneath the surface, many of these challenges were already developing during Angola's boom years. Luanda failed to use its oil wealth to diversify its economy, and its rhetoric of state building and poverty alleviation obscured the fact that [president José Eduardo] dos Santos' allies were benefiting massively from kickbacks and contracts generated by government investment. Oliveira, Ricardo Soares De „Angola's Perfect Storm: The dos Santos Regime and the Oil Crisis“, *Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/angola/2015-10-28/angolas-perfect-storm?cid=soc-fb-rdr> (accessed 02.10.2016).

Greetings to everyone, thank you for the good faith
 It's time to leave and this is my final song
 This represents an ant challenging an elephant
 A kilogram of plutonium around the waist
 Certain death
 I've run out of time and patience
 Passivity and benevolence
 I speak in the name of a people exhausted from subservience
 We're sick of your incoherence and interferences
 [...]
 This is my suicide note to my parents
 I love you very much, I'm sorry but I can take it no longer
 Every day that goes by my life becomes less valuable
 Every day that goes by a bit of hope dies [...]³

After this performance the rapper called for a massive street demonstration against the president José Eduardo dos Santos, then in power for 32 years. Before an enthusiastic if somewhat perplexed crowd Beirão announced:

I want to see on the 7th [of March] who's the pure ,Revu' [revolutionary]! On the 7th, if we live till then, [...] Independence Square, the 7th is our day. Libya is managing, Gadhafi will fall. Zédu [President Eduardo dos Santos] is becoming even more ancient, we don't want this anymore.⁴

Clearly inspired by the mass demonstrations that swept the Arab world during the Winter/Spring of 2011, Beirão and other activists tried to motivate the audience to join them in a peaceful march, using nothing but pans and vuvuzelas to make noise and in this symbolic way protest against the governing power. In the context of Angola's anticolonial and postcolonial history, the references in Beirão's speech on stage bear great significance. The „revolution“ has been a celebrated ideal since the anticolonial war of the 1960s, when indigenous resistance groups embraced a rhetoric of liberation that often leaned strongly on the socialist ideas of the time – inspired by Cuba and Vietnam, among others. That war eventually contributed to the country's independence in 1975, when the Portuguese colonial regime gave way to the socialist government of the MPLA

³ „Saudações a todos, obrigado pela dedicação/ Chegou a hora de partir esta é a minha ultima canção/ Isto representa a formiga que desafia o elefante/ Um quilograma de plutónio na cintura/ Morte certa/ Esgotou-se o tempo e a paciência/ Passividade e a benevolência/ Falo em nome de um povo exausto de subserviência/ Estamos fartos das tuas incoerências e ingerências (...) Isto é a minha nota de suicídio a meus pais/ Amo-os muito, desculpem, mas não aguento mais/ Cada dia que passa minha vida perde a importância/ Cada dia que passa morre um pouco a esperança (...)“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NQ-JHx81Oo> (accessed 02.10.2016, my transcription and translation).

⁴ Footage from this performance and speech can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mhF7tDoekg (accessed 02.10.2016).

(People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), and a „revolutionary“ mindset became one of the guiding cultural values. This was clearly evidenced in the new national anthem, with the chorus lines: „Angola moving forward, revolution/ for the people's power/ United fatherland, freedom/ One people, one nation“⁵.

The anthem is an important piece of collective identity in Angola. Every member of Beirão's generation, born after independence, who grew up in the areas controlled and administered by the MPLA⁶, sang the anthem every morning before entering the classroom. The children were socialized as „Pioneers of Agostinho Neto“, the country's first president and founding father – and the only president to precede José Eduardo dos Santos. They were taught to shout out slogans such as „Everything for the people“ and „The struggle continues“, in which the values of the revolution were implied. To this day, Agostinho Neto remains somewhat of a cult figure in Angola, and especially in Luanda. A statue of the first president and „father“ of the Angolan pioneers stands proudly at the centre of the Independence Square (Praça da Independência), his fist raised victoriously in celebration of the successful struggle for liberation from the shackles of colonialism. Precisely this square, with this evocative figure, was meant to become the centre of what Beirão and other activists hoped would be the beginning of a new revolution – and in a sense, then, also the continuation of the revolutionary struggle this generation had been taught to emulate.

The March 7th demonstration in 2011 was at first glance a failure. Only a handful of people showed up and were swiftly deterred by the police. Some of the participants, including Beirão, spent hours in jail⁷. After this event, the activists, who became known as ‚Revus‘ (short for „revolutionaries“) were turned into a target for harassment by government forces and pro-government supporters. They were exposed to continual threats against the safety of their family and were victims of physical attacks in their headquarters⁸. On June 20th,

⁵ „Angola avante, revolução/ Pelo poder popular/ Pátria unida, liberdade/ Um só povo, uma só nação“. Lyrics by Manuel Rui, one of Angola's foremost poets. My translation.

⁶ Immediately upon attainment of independence, Angola slipped into a civil war that eventually split the country in two major fronts: the northern/coastal area (including the capital, Luanda) controlled by the MPLA, and the southern/interior area controlled by UNITA (União Nacional pela Independência Total de Angola). People growing up in the latter area are bound to have had a different upbringing and cultural influences, yet since the defeat of UNITA and the end of the civil war in 2002, the government has been firmly in the hands of the MPLA and the discourse of national identity has been fully controlled by this party.

⁷ See for example Pawson, Lara: „Angola is stirred by the spirit of revolution“, The Guardian, March 8, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/08/angola-spirit-revolution> (accessed 02.10.2016).

⁸ See for example: Human Rights Watch, „Angola: violent Crackdown on Critics“, April 2, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/02/angola-violent-crackdown-critics> (accessed 02.10.2016); Morais, Rafael Marques de: „Rapper and Activist Luaty Beirao Released“, Maka Angola, July 13, 2012, <http://www.makaangola.org/2012/07/rapper-and-activist-luaty-beirao-released/> (accessed 02.10.2016); Redvers, Louise: „Luaty da Silva Beirao is prepared to take

2015, the ‚Revus’ were preparing to proceed with the reading and discussion of Gene Sharp’s influential book-length essay *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (1993), which had served as an inspiration also to activists in Egypt and Tunisia⁹. Interrupted by the police, the group was carried to prison and formally accused of plotting a coup d’état. The number of accused rose to 17, including two women. On November 16th, two months after Beirão’s hunger strike (which lasted a total of 37 days, mirroring the 37 years of dos Santos’ presidency), the trial finally began. The accusation lawyers and judges were repeatedly criticized by the accused for their lack of objectivity and regard for the country’s laws. During a hearing in March 2016, all of the accused showed up in court wearing T-Shirts with pictures of their own faces painted as clowns, thereby expressing their view of the entire procedure as a „circus show”¹⁰. On March 28th, the activists were formally sentenced to two to eight years of imprisonment on the charge of „rebellion against the president of the republic” and „criminal association”. Beirão himself got five years¹¹. However, on June 29th they were all released and the government is now considering granting them amnesty, a gesture that the activists actually reject, as they still consider themselves not guilty of the charges presented by the government¹². Clearly Angola celebrated its 40th independence anniversary amidst significant political and social tensions.

One could almost say that the government harassment and eventual imprisonment of Beirão had already been forecast in the rapper’s own music. In

the rap”, Mail & Guardian, May 24. 2013, <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-24-00-luaty-da-silva-beirao-is-prepared-to-take-the-rap> (accessed 02.10.2016).

⁹ Cf. Allison, Simon: „Reading the revolution: the book club that terrified the Angolan regime”, The Guardian, June 30th, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/30/angola-book-club-dos-santos-arrests> (accessed 02.10.2016); and Sousa, Ana Naomi de: „Angola launches crackdown amid plunging oil prices”, Al Jazeera, July 27th, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/07/angola-launches-crackdown-plunging-oil-prices-150723120543012.html> (accessed 02.10.2016); Moorman, Marissa: „Watch out Angola – repression only generates more dissent”, October 13th, 2015, The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/13/angola-repression-generates-more-dissent-politics-mpla?CMP=share_btn_fb (accessed 02.10.2016).

¹⁰ Cf. Krippahl, Christina: „A trial in Angola increasingly seen as a farce”, DW, March 21st, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/a-trial-in-angola-increasingly-seen-as-a-farce/a-19131740> (accessed 02.10.2016); Lusa, „Ativistas angolanos levam ‚palhaçada’ a tribunal e ficam for a do julgamento”, DN-Diário de Notícias, March 7, 2016, <http://www.dn.pt/mundo/interior/ativistas-angolanos-levam-palhacada-a-tribunal-e-ficam-fora-do-julgamento-5065270.html> (accessed 02.10.2016).

¹¹ See Kippahl, Christina: „Angola: A sad day for freedom of expression”, DW, March 28, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/angola-a-sad-day-for-freedom-of-expression/a-19146779> (accessed 02.10.2016).

¹² N.a.: „AFP in Luanda, Angola court orders conditional release of jailed activist book club”, The Guardian, June 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/29/angola-court-jailed-activist-book-club-conditional-release> (accessed 02.10.2016).

the lyrics to the song „Cuka“ (an ironic homage to the country’s local beer) he says of the government and the President:

Because the government is the people’s father
And they call that dude the ‚Peace Architect’
But if we poke them in the eye
They might as well architect our funeral
[...]
Cause we all know that he who dares to tell the truth
Ends up on the other side of town[...]¹³

The intermingling of politics and musical performance is at its most striking in the case of Luaty Beirão, but he is not the only rapper in Angola who has used his art and his visibility to promote political causes or to address the state of the nation. Indeed, Beirão is only the most prominent representative of a whole generation of musicians for whom being an *Angolan* artist seems to be synonymous with engaging with the nation’s self-image and modifying it – either on the performative level or through actual political interventions. Using the example of rap, this article discusses the role of popular music as one of the foremost media of collective memory as well as political activism in our current times. The case of Angola provides a paradigmatic example of rap’s key contribution to the articulation of collective grievances and expectations. These rappers consciously present themselves not only as spokesmen for the Angolan people but also as the proud heirs of the nation’s founding fathers: the generation of poets and musicians who in the 1960s used their art to oppose the Portuguese colonial rule. The bridge between past and present and the role of music in the (re-)construction of a national identity are at the core of the following analysis.

Rap Music and the Question of Citizenship

Scholarly discussions of rap music in African countries constitute an enterprise still in its early days but which has already started to bear fruit. An important publication in this field is the volume *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World* edited by Eric Charry (2012), which provides an overview of rap music developments in countries like Ghana, South Africa, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania. The discussions of rap in this volume range from its influence on the propagation of specific models of masculinity to the politics of identity. Charry himself concludes that hip hop culture in Africa has been marked by two key issues,

¹³ „Porque o governo é pai do povo/ e arquiteto da paz, mas/ se lhes picas a mão no olho/ te arquetam o funeral (...) Porque quem fala a verdade/ vai parar ao outro lado da cidade“. Batida feat. Ikonoklasta, „Cuka“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLaj5rEzDvA> (accessed 02.10.2016, my translation).

namely „globalization and authenticity“¹⁴. These are crucial terms also for a discussion of national cultures and how they are represented in popular music, including the concomitant representations of local concerns and cultural difference.

Another central contribution has been *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization* by Mwenda Ntarangwi (2009) which looks at rap in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and focuses extensively on the way artists position themselves critically vis-à-vis political and economic policies of their governments, thus emphasizing the contribution of this style of music to the national public sphere. Additionally, scholarly articles and chapters have highlighted the use of rap music as a tool for political intervention in African countries like Senegal, Kenya or Zimbabwe, particularly in times of social and political tension¹⁵. That rap can indeed have a strong influence on popular uprisings has been most recently illustrated by the events in Senegal and Burkina Faso. The Senegalese protest movement „Y'en a marre“ („we've had enough“) in 2012 was partially led by famous local musicians such as Youssou N'Dour and the rapper Didier Awadi, while the popular protests in Ouagadougou that finally ousted the Burkinabé president in October 2015 were led by the group „Le Balai Citoyen“ („civic broom“) which had been formed by the famous rapper Smockey and the reggae artist Sams'K Le Jah. More than simply providing the soundtrack to these popular demonstrations, the rappers also advanced certain political ideas¹⁶.

¹⁴ Charry, Eric: „Music for an African Twenty-First Century“, in: Charry, Eric (ed.), *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 283-316.

¹⁵ See for example Gueye, Marame: „Urban Guerrilla Poetry: The Movement *Y'en a Marre* and the Socio-Political Influences of Hip Hop in Senegal“, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 6/3 (9/2013), pp. 22-42; Fredericks, Rosalind: „The Old Man is Dead': Hip Hop and the Arts of Citizenship of Senegalese Youth“, *Antipode*, 46/1 (1/2014), pp. 130-148; Foucher, Vincent: „Blue Marches': Public Performance and Political Turnover in Senegal“, in: *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa*, Strauss, Julia C/ O'Brien, Donal B. Cruise (eds.), New York: Tauris & Co, 2007, pp. 111-132; Marsh, Charity/Petty, Sheila: „Globalization, Identity and Youth Resistance: Kenya's Hip Hop Parliament“, *Musicultures*, 38 (2011), pp. 132-148; Kellerer, Katja: „Chant Down the System 'till Babylon Falls': The Political Dimensions of Underground Hip Hop and Urban Grooves in Zimbabwe“, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 6/3, (11/2013), pp. 43-64.

¹⁶ Cf. Howden, Daniel: „Rap revolution: Voices of dissent in Senegal“, Independent, February 20th, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/rap-revolution-voices-of-dissent-in-senegal-7218932.html> (accessed 02.10.2016); n.a.: „The movement Y'en a marre – we've had enough“, United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, December 2012, <http://www.unric.org/en/right-to-participation/28099-the-movement-yen-a-marre-weve-had-enough> (accessed 02.10.2016); Corey-Boulet, Robbie: „The soundtrack to Burkina Faso's revolution“, Al Jazeera, January 28th, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2016/1/28/burkina-faso-a-rappers-role-in-revolution.html> (accessed 02.10.2016).

Turning specifically to Angola, this article leans strongly on the arguments presented by Marissa Moorman in *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times* (2008), dealing with the rise of a generation of politically engaged musicians in the 1960s, when Angola was still a Portuguese colony. Moorman traces the important contribution of Angolan popular music to the creation of a sense of national identity that was distinct from the Portuguese colonial discourse. *Intonations* shows that musicians played a crucial role in channeling the dissatisfactions and articulating the desires and demands of a larger part of the population. The new Angolan nation was thus first and foremost imagined in the realm of culture, in which music played a leading role.

Moorman's study closes with a brief reference to rap music in Angola in the early 2000s, focusing on the rapper MCK, one of the leading figures of Angolan hip hop. Caught singing the chorus of one of MCK's most famous songs, „A técnica, a causa e as consequências“ („The technique, the causes and the consequences“) – a cynical tirade against the ineffective and corrupt government – a young man was brutally killed on the beach by the President's private security forces in what amounted to an unofficial public execution. The case was never filed as murder and there were no further investigations. In the public sphere of the local hip hop community, however, it was perceived as another proof of the injustices suffered by the Angolan population on a daily basis – a topic that MCK has been dealing with extensively in his music since his first album in 2003, entitled „Trincheira de Ideias“ (roughly „Trenches of the Mind“).

Partly as a result of this execution, MCK became even more famous. When he released his third album in 2012, the rapper sold 10 000 copies in Luanda on the first day alone¹⁷. Significantly, Moorman closes her book with the following observation:

Perhaps the moral of the story is that explicit political critique can get you or your audiences killed. MCK's music has been banned from radio and television but still circulates informally. [...] Like the music of the 1960s and 1970s, this new music produces a kind of sovereignty in the maws of repression and a sense that democracy comes from taking the initiative, from doing for oneself and one's neighbors. If there are no clubs in which this sentiment can cohere, perhaps the streets are the next venue. And perhaps this music is the social, if not the instrumental, heir to the music of [Angola's] golden age [in the 1960s].¹⁸

Moorman's reference to a „moral of the story“ leads us back to Beirão's cynical remarks in the song „Cuka“, quoted above. The sense that rap music speaks the truth in the face of oppression has been part and parcel of the genre

¹⁷ See Lopes, Mario: „Voz de Angola“, *Publico*, February 2012, <http://www.buala.org/pt/palcos/voz-de-angola> (accessed 02.10.206).

¹⁸ Moorman, Marissa: *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008, p. 167.

from its inception in the USA in the 1980s. The appeal of rap is strongly based on the ‚message’ transmitted by the lyrics. In hip hop culture, the rapper or MC (Master of Ceremonies) acts as a spokes(wo)man for a community which he or she is said to ‚represent’¹⁹. In this aspect, as scholars in hip hop studies have noted, rap music acquires a unique social and political edge that is not to be found to the same degree in other forms of popular music²⁰. As the favoured setting for rap lyrics and music videos, the streets become the place where information and opinions that authoritarian governments try to restrict can flow freely through word of mouth, and the MC, acting as the community’s mouthpiece, articulates what other people do not dare for fear of retribution. Because the rapper embraces the risk involved in (literally) speaking up, he or she becomes also a symbol of political resistance. From here the step towards assuming the role of a revolutionary is a small one, particularly in cultural contexts such as that of postcolonial Angola, in which revolution – whatever it may mean to different audiences – has been continually praised as a key national value.

As in the recent cases of Burkina Faso and Senegal, many rappers in Angola have assumed the position of spokespersons for the people at large. Their music and their public statements repeatedly touch upon questions of citizenship and civil rights: if indeed the Angolan government is a fully-fledged democracy, as the leading party itself claims, then freedom of speech – including for rappers and their audiences – should be a given. Any form of suppression or persecution of rappers and activists reveals the limits of freedom within the country. This, in turn, raises important questions about the sort of nation that Angola has become 40 years since attaining independence. Precisely this crisis of national identity feeds back into rap music.

Memory and National Identity

The lyrical dimension of rap music in Angola allows us to draw parallels between the current cultural environment in the country and the spirit of resistance in the 1960s. The poetry of that period revealed a similar politically motivated intent – with analogous consequences, i.e., repression and imprisonment – and became one of the chief vehicles of the struggle for independence from the Portuguese colonial regime. Thus, parallel to Moorman’s study of music and national identity in the 1960s, it is equally important to

¹⁹ Cf. Bradley, Adam: *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, New York: Basic Books, 2009; Kitwana, Bakari: “The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power”, in: *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, Forman, Murray/Neal, Mark Anthony (eds.), New York/London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 341–50.

²⁰ Cf. Rose, Tricia *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Middletown CT: Wesleyan, 1994; Mitchell, Toni (ed.): *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002; Perry, Imani: *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

highlight the contribution of literature, especially poetry, as several anti-colonial activists used this medium to advance a new sense of national belonging²¹. Chief among them was Agostinho Neto, one of the country's most renowned poets, who would become the first president of Angola upon its independence in 1975. In this article I therefore pay special attention to song lyrics as a unique form of expression in Angola that bears many resemblances to the poetry of the 1960s.

As Moorman has argued in her discussion of Angolan music, and many critics have highlighted regarding literature, the 1960s were a period of artistic innovation²². The on-going and intensifying anti-colonial war was sustained ideologically not only through the development of a political consciousness – generally leaning left, as was the case with many anti-colonial movements throughout the world at the time²³ – but also through the articulation of a distinct national identity in cultural products that were meant to distance themselves from the dominant colonial images of Angola. It is especially significant that many of the leaders and/or fighters in the anti-colonial war – e.g. Agostinho Neto, Viriato da Cruz, Luandino Vieira, Pepetela – were either already known for their writing or would establish themselves as influential national authors in the immediate post-war period. Particularly Agostinho Neto, elevated to the status of the nation's founding father, stands for that special combination between political engagement and artistic expression. As the country's first president, he came to embody the power of the (anti-colonial) revolution through deeds as well as words.

The current generation of rappers, born roughly between 1975 and 1986, are themselves breaking ground through the use of innovative musical and performative techniques, including the special value placed on lyrical content. Yet both their music and their lyrics involve a strong recycling component. In line with rap's penchant for appropriating material from other artists, genres and epochs, Angolan rappers sample songs from the 1960s, quote poems and political speeches of the anti-colonial era, refer to the nation's founding fathers as their

²¹ On the importance of literature and especially poetry in Angola's anti-colonial struggle, see Leite, Ana Mafalda: „Angola“, in *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*, Patrick Chabal (ed.), London: Hurst & Company, 1996; Padilha, Laura Cavalcante: „Guerra, poesia, estilhaç[ament]os - um olhar para Angola“, *Mulemba*, 1 (2009), pp. 1-14; Arrimar, Jorge: „A Nova Poesia Angolana“, *Zunái*, 6/21 (10/2010) http://www.revistazunai.com/materias_especiais/festival_tordesilhas2/comunicacao_jorge_arimar.htm (accessed 31.3.2016).

²² Cf. Hughes, Heather: „Protest Poetry in Pre-Independence Mozambique and Angola“, *English in Africa*, 4/1 (3/1977), pp. 18-31; Hamilton, Russel G: „A Country Also Built of Poems: Nationalist and Angolan Literature“, *Research in African Literatures*, 13/3 (Autumn 1982), pp. 315-326; Oliveira, Vera Lucia de: „Transformações na literatura angolana“, *Revista de Letras*, 32 (1992), pp. 191-198; Leite, Ana Mafalda : „Angola“, in *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*, op.cit., pp. 103-164.

²³ Cf. Young, Robert: *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001, especially p. 167-181.

source of inspiration, recall important events and hero(in)es of the struggle for independence. In this way, both musically and ideologically, the present enters into a dialogue with the past, and memory serves as a powerful weapon of social criticism and as a tool for identity construction.

In his influential article „Collective Memory and Cultural Identity“²⁴, Jan Assmann argued that one of the chief functions of cultural memory is the „concretion of identity“, whereby a group of people establish their sense of unity and particularity by making distinctions between themselves and those who are not part of the group, as well as by determining what they are and are not. Memory provides the binding element: it is founded on shared practices, symbols, rituals, texts and images that are pieced together so as to construct a particular collective narrative. Assmann concludes: „Through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and others“²⁵. However, it is important to highlight as well that collective identities are not merely reflected in memorial practices, but are defined and redefined through „public acts of remembrance“, as Ann Rigney has put it²⁶. Resorting to the concept of „recursivity“, Rigney argues that cultural memory is in fact constructed through the repetition, reproduction and transformation of acts of remembrance. Particularly texts and images play an important role here, as they can be constantly reproduced and are furthermore not tied to a particular time or place (even though they originate in a specific moment and site). This allows individuals and groups to actually share memories across generations and create the sense of belonging to an „imagined community“, as Benedict Anderson famously defined nations²⁷.

The importance of memory for national identities has been emphasized also by Aleida Assmann, who suggested the term „political memory“ for the special level of ideology formation involved in the construction of the nation as a distinct community of remembrance²⁸. Symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies and monuments are used here in a distinctly selective manner to heighten a community's moments of defeat and triumph that can fit into a general narrative of martyrdom and heroism. Thus, for example, the Angolan nation has built its identity around the experience of colonial oppression and the horrors of transatlantic slavery instituted by the colonial powers, while at the same time celebrating the victorious anti-colonial struggle that finally ousted the Portuguese

²⁴ Assmann, Jan: „Collective Memory and Cultural Identity“, *New German Critique*, 65, (1995), pp. 125-133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁶ Rigney, Ann: „Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory“, *Journal of European Studies* 35/1 (3/2005), pp. 11-28, here p.11.

²⁷ Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, London: Verso, 1991.

²⁸ Assmann, Aleida: „Memory, Individual and Collective“, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Goodin, Robert E./ Tilly, Charles (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 210-224.

rulers in 1975. Both moments place the Angolans on the righteous side, thus creating a positive self-image. Parallel to this selective relationship to history, there is also an active movement of exclusion of moments of guilt and shame from a nation's shared memories. Anything that disturbs the dominant narrative of heroism and martyrdom and presents the nation from a more dubious position can simply be omitted from public acts of remembrance. For this very reason, Assmann concludes that political memory constitutes a permanently challenged and contested field, as different groups may bring into public consciousness episodes and details of shared history that have been excluded from the nation's dominant narrative. As Astrid Erll puts it, „collective memory[...] is oriented towards the needs and interests of the group in the present, and thus proceeds in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner. Along the way, what is remembered can become distorted and shifted to such an extent that the result is closer to fiction than to a past reality“²⁹. I would add that in the case of the nation we need to change Erll's formulation „the group“ to „the dominant group“, as we cannot expect absolute unity or even horizontality in such an overwhelmingly large formation. It is precisely because members of a nation do not know each other personally and can only relate to their perceived compatriots through shared texts, images and symbols that Anderson highlighted the imagined aspect of the nation as a community.

Memory studies have revealed themselves particularly fruitful for the analysis of shifting political and ideological systems, as a community's shared values undergo major re-evaluation and negotiations that largely take place in the public sphere of culture³⁰. The case of Angola between 1975 and 2015 offers fertile ground for the exploration of the dynamic aspect of collective memory, as the nation's political self-image turned from anti-colonial resistance to the socialist project of building revolutionary subjects (including the nation's young pioneers), and finally entered the neoliberal mode of consumption and political corruption currently criticized by international observers, activists and artists³¹. It is particularly interesting here to reflect on the contribution of cultural products

²⁹ Erll, Astrid: *Memory in Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 17.

³⁰ See for example Brito, Alexandra Baharona de/ González-Enrique, Carmen/Aguilar, Paloma: *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Assmann, Aleida: *Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Munich: Beck, 2006, and *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung*, Munich: Beck, 2007.

³¹ Various publications in the field of history and political science have highlighted the major impact that Cold War politics on the one hand, and post-socialist commercial interests on the other have had on the civil war and the ensuing economic boom that nevertheless left most of the population untouched by the fruits of the oil and diamond revenues. See especially Hodges, Tony: *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State*, Fridtjof Nansen Institute, 2001; and more recently Oliveira, Ricardo Soares de: *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; Birmingham, David: *A Short History of Modern Angola*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

to these shifts, especially on the way the past is repeatedly evoked as a unifying and meaning-giving element.

In a young nation such as Angola, which had its founding moment in a situation of armed struggle and went on to endure 27 years of civil war, we find the past repeatedly interfering with the present – be it in references to the oppression and deprivation suffered under colonialism, or the (unfulfilled) promises of unity and prosperity after the attainment of independence. Predictably, rap music in Angola is teeming with references to the past. Significantly, these aspects of cultural memory are used in order to reflect on the present situation. Having now arrived at a position from which they can influence the way the nation will henceforward be imagined, this generation of critically-minded musicians is clearly invested in reflecting about the present and reframing the past, in order to forge a future image that best suits their own visions. In the following section I will discuss in detail three rap songs and music videos in which the past appears particularly haunting, throwing light on the present state of the nation.

„The saga doesn’t stop“: the Past in the Present

The recursivity of images and texts mentioned by Rigney can be most fruitfully illustrated with a closer look at the song „Sombra“ („Shadow“) by Kid MC, and particularly at the interaction between lyrics and music video. Born in 1986 in the province of Huila and residing in Luanda since 1992, Kid MC launched his career as a rapper in 2008. „Sombra“, taken from his third album with the same title (2013), is one of Kid MC’s most famous songs. Its epic character is noticeable immediately by the looped somber piano melody and especially by the opening lines, „A saga não pára“ („the saga doesn’t stop“), which prepare the listener for a narrative steeped in history and heroism. The speaker presents himself as a supernatural being, roaming at first in a celestial realm. As the son of God, he is given a mission to come to planet Earth and chooses Angola as his base. We are led to presume that the speaker is in fact the Messiah, and hence his mission in Angola becomes the means of ushering in a new age. The end of the first and the whole second stanza are of particular interest from a memory studies perspective:

[...]
And so I focused on the country for a secret mission
And my spirit came to Angola in 1960

The spirit was already in the air
I visited minds and hearts that thought of tomorrow
I propelled the war of a people without blinders
Against the fascist colonialist regime
In 61 I began to be merry, I told the men to fight

That the bullets would not touch them
 Moved by the revolt they picket up machetes
 I saw the strength of faith in the claws of Imperial Santana
 Some time after I transformed into the rare pen
 That Agostinho Neto used to write *Sagrada Esperança*
 In 75 total Independence
 Proclaimed by the 3 movements for national liberation
 And so the Father told me to appear
 I was born on the 16th of the 6th of 1986
 Malanje blood, first cry in Huila,
 With a mother almost from the north, Kid now has a physical shape
 I grew up watching an absurd war
 Which thanks to the Father had an ending in the most adult way
 I already looked after you through physical shape
 And it's not just now
 If you don't get it, I'm your shadow
 [...] ³²

The lyrics summarize the foundational history of postcolonial Angola, how it came into being through the anti-colonial guerrilla war that started in 1961 and culminated in the independence of 1975. We can clearly identify here a selection of triumphant moments, enhanced by references to national heroes such as Imperial Santana, one of the organizers of a popular uprising in Luanda on February 4th, 1961, which has been enshrined as the triggering event for the armed struggle. The „heroes of February 4th“ are celebrated also in the second line of the national anthem; hence this is a reference that will be familiar to most Angolans. The speaker presents himself as the very energy that pushed for the liberation of the Angolan people, both through physical struggle and consciousness expansion. Agostinho Neto's famous volume of poetry, *Sagrada Esperança* (published in 1977 but containing poems written in the 1950s and 60s) is presented here as a literally sacred text, brought to being by the divine power of the Messiah's spirit.

³² „Então foquei no país para missão secreta/ E o meu espírito veio para Angola em 1960/ O espírito já pairava no ar/ Eu visitava mentes e corações que pensavam no amanhã/ Impulsionei a guerra de um povo sem vedação nas vistas/ Contra o fascista regime colonialista/ Em '61 comecei-me a alegrar, disse aos homens para lutar/ Que as balas não os haveriam de tocar/ Movidos de revolta pegaram em catanas/ Eu vi a força da crença nas garras do Imperial Santana/ Tempos depois transformei-me na caneta rara/ Que Agostinho Neto usou para escrever a *Sagrada Esperança*/ Em '75 independência total/ proclamada pelos 3 movimentos de libertação nacional/ E assim o pai mandou-me aparecer/ Nasci aos 16 de 6 de 1986/ Sangue de Malanje, primeiro choro na Huíla/ Com mãe quase nortenha, o Kid tem forma física/ Cresci a ver uma guerra absurda/ Que graças ao pai teve um final da maneira mais adulta/ Eu já olhava por vocês em forma física/ E não é de agora/ Se não sabes, eu sou a tua sombra (...)“. Kid MC, „Sombra“, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoPg_fZC5rk (accessed 02.10.2016, my transcription and translation).

The narration then takes a sharp turn towards a more contested event of Angola's history, namely the civil war fought between the national liberation movements cursorily celebrated in the song. It is within this environment of confusion (or „absurdity“, as the speaker puts it) that the spirit assumes a human shape, which we are led to conclude is none other than the rapper Kid MC himself. The speaker's ominous birth date, with its triple repetition of the number 6, creates confusion between a saviour sent from heaven and Satan himself. Who, then, is the father who ended this „absurd“ war?

The ambiguity of the lyrics at this stage is very curious when contrasted to the preceding celebratory lines referring to the war of liberation from Portuguese rule. Unlike the anti-colonial struggle, the memory of the civil war in Angola cannot be easily filed under „triumph“ nor even under „martyrdom“. Although the MPLA government has repeatedly tried to frame those 27 years of violence under the rubric of triumph – as it came out victorious – the trauma of the war is still present for many people, including those who, like the song's speaker, were forced to flee the interior (the province of Huila, in the south of the country, where UNITA vied with the MPLA government for control) for the capital in search of safety. The majority of these people ended up settling down in the capital's ever expanding slums, the „musseques“, where living conditions are seriously substandard³³.

The lyrically performed act of remembrance in „Sombra“ is enhanced by the music video, which essentially features a young teenage boy in a musseque in Luanda, running through the narrow paths between the shacks after a mysterious moving human shadow. In an abandoned shack an old TV screen shows archival images of the Angolan people's celebration of the attainment of independence, including the return of Agostinho Neto from political exile to Luanda. Eventually the boy is led by the shadow to this shack, where he finds black and white photos of Agostinho Neto on an old armchair. There is also a short caption of an old book of poetry, presumably containing Neto's own poems.

Towards the end of the video, and after encountering this archival material, the boy transforms into the speaker himself by lip-syncing the lyrics. The loose narrative suggests that the encounter with the nation's triumphant history has raised the young boy's consciousness. He turns from anonymous slum inhabitant into an incarnation of the Messiah, acquiring also a new self-confidence conveyed by close shots of his earnest facial features. This, we are led to presume, is the true Angolan spirit; and it is thanks to the mysterious shadow, which has steered him towards the archive, that the boy can recover it. It is highly significant that the archive has been placed in an old shack in the middle of the musseque, which further suggests not only that the history of Angola's triumph belongs to the people, but also that the people can and should access it easily.

³³ At the same time, in line with the generic convention of associating rap with the social margins, the musseques are routinely presented as the home of Angola's truly conscious rap.

The general absence of images associated with the civil war – although also here the music video could have relied on extensive archival footage – reinforces the argument presented above, namely, that it is more difficult to convey the memory of a shameful or problematic event than it is to focus on moments of triumph. All in all, both the lyrics and the music video of „Sombra“ resort to the nation’s official foundational narrative to celebrate the Angolan people, but also to suggest that the glory that lies in the past needs to be repeated in the present.

A far more sceptical stance is assumed in the song „Nzala (Remake)“ by the overtly critical rapper MCK in collaboration with Paulo Flores, one of the country’s most famous Semba musicians, whose lyrics also often refer to problems of corruption and the long-lasting effects of the war in Angola. „Nzala (Remake)“ is part of MCK’s third album, *Proibido Ouvir Isto* („Listening is Forbidden“) from 2012, which can be interpreted as a direct commentary on the death of his young fan at the hands of the president’s guards in 2003. While MCK raps the main stanzas in Portuguese, Flores takes over the chorus with a remake of the original „Nzala“ by Elias diá Kimuezu, often referred to as „the king of Angolan music“³⁴. Like the original „Nzala“, Flores’ version is sung in Kimbundu, the country’s most important indigenous language, which had also been adopted by many of the musicians of the 1960s as an act of defiance against the colonial regime³⁵. The remake of the song itself already acts as a form of remembrance, recovering the „golden age“ of Angolan music to suggest that a new age of innovation and regeneration is underway. Furthermore, the collaboration between MCK and Flores (with Kimuezu’s ghost in the background) as well as the combination of languages signal the song’s strong critical stance, which becomes quickly obvious in the lyrics and in the cartoon-based music video. In her journalistic article on rap and activism in Angola, the literary critic Susan de Oliveira sums up this song in the following way: „Nzala’ is a Kimbundu word meaning hunger, and the lyrics as well as the cartoon animation tell us the story of a kid who becomes a victim of hunger, plagued by all the evils already previously denounced in [MCK’s] rap ‘A Técnica, as causas e as consequências’“³⁶.

In MCK’s rapped stanzas, the speaker narrates the sad story of a boy who loses both his parents and his sister in the interior of the country during the civil war. He is said to come from Bié, one of the regions most severely affected by the war, and the death of the family members is attributed to soldiers, though it is left unclear whether they belonged to the governing party, the MPLA, or to its enemy, the UNITA. The second stanza sees the boy making his way from the

³⁴ Cf. Moorman, Marissa: *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times*, op.cit., p. 65.

³⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 65, 74, 126.

³⁶ Oliveira, Susan de „O Rap e o ativismo pelos direitos humanos em Angola – parte 2“ (my translation), <http://www.buala.org/pt/palcos/o-rap-e-o-ativismo-pelos-direitos-humanos-em-angola-parte-2> (accessed 02.10.2016).

interior to the capital, very much like the speaker of „Sombra“, and presents his new harsh life as a refugee in Luanda:

As a displaced person from Bié
The kid left Kuito to Benguela on foot
Long walk, land full of mines
Shots from the AK, the kid, nothing
He was a kid, all he could do was cry
Sadness, rage, loses a leg
Arrived in Luanda without his left leg
Looking for heaven, the kid found hell
Transformed into a street kid in front of the government's eyes
Sleeps under the bridge from winter to winter
Without motherly warmth, separated from the notebook
The suffering of the child seems eternal
Modern slave of the Mercedes and the suit
Stepson of the war, peaceful citizen
It's a drag to wash the car, shine the shoe
Share the rubbish container with the dog and cat
The fish bones, on the plate of the magnate
Who filled his belly during the war
Made his wealth with the blood of the landless
He has the face and the name of the mosquito that bites us
That kid eats a lot of dust [...]³⁷

The lyrics resort to a number of common descriptions of child victims of the civil war in Angola: the boy loses a leg to an anti-personnel mine – a fate that met more than 80 000 Angolans³⁸, turning maimed children into one of the most emblematic images of the civil war. Once he arrives in the capital, he joins the large number of street children and thus becomes part of a shadowy and ignored

³⁷ „Na condição de deslocado do Bié/ O puto saiu do Kuito até Benguela a pé/ Longa caminhada, terra minada/ Disparos da AKA, puto nada/ Ele era puto, só podia chorar/ Tristeza, raiva, perde a perna/ Chegou em Luanda sem a perna esquerda/ A procura do céu, o garoto achou o inferno/ Transformou-se em puto de rua aos olhos do governo/ Dorme debaixo da ponte de inverno a inverno,/ Sem calor materno, divorciado do caderno/ Parece eterno o sofrimento do pequeno/ Escravo moderno do Mercedes e do terno/ Enteadado da Guerra, cidadão pacato/ E chato lavar carro, engraxar sapato,/ Partilhar no contentor com o cão e o gato/ A espinha, no prato, do magnata/ Que encheu a barriga no tempo da Guerra/ Construiu riqueza com o sangue do sem-terra/ Tem a cara e o nome do mosquito que nos ferra/ Esse miúdo come muito pó[...]“. MCK feat. Paulo Flores, „Nzala (Remake)“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0tKfIdGUQQ> (accessed 02.10.2016, my transcription and translation).

³⁸ Cf. Mynott, Adam: „Angolan's Landmine Legacy“, BBC News, November 29th, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4049351.stm> (accessed 02.10.2016); United Nations Development Programme, „Landmine clearing efforts help boost Angola's recovery“, April 2nd, 2012, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2012/04/02/landmine-clearing-efforts-help-boost-angola-s-recovery.html> (accessed 02.10.2016).

segment of the city's population that possesses no rights and receives no care³⁹. These images of total desolation are contrasted with the figure of the „magnate“ whose wealth is directly linked to the war – thus suggesting that he may in fact be a high member of the MPLA's armed forces, as many were rewarded after the war with high administrative positions and excessive salaries⁴⁰. The line „tem a cara e o nome do mosquito que nos ferra“ („he has the face and the name of the mosquito that bites us“) is particularly relevant here, being a direct quotation from MCK's most (in)famous song, „A Técnica, as causas e as consequências“, in which the said „mosquito“ is identified as the corrupt political class that builds its wealth at the expenses of the Angolan people.

While the lyrics clearly act as a form of remembrance of the civil war – producing an unambiguous link between this tragic episode of Angola's recent history and the extreme affluence of a small elite closely connected with the MPLA – the music video further acts as a medium of memory by combining the narrative of the lyrics with particular national symbols. At one point the cartoon rendition of the song presents MCK and Flores in front of the national flag, thus granting them the unambiguous status of the nation's spokespersons. This image also reminds audiences of the importance of the flag as a symbol of the nation, with the machete and sickle at its centre standing for the triumphant popular uprising against colonialism and the imagined prosperity that was to come with the (at least nominally) socialist regime that followed the anti-colonial war. It is also relevant that, as part of his public image, MCK has opted to wear a pair of glasses eerily similar to the ones worn by the iconic figure of Agostinho Neto. We are thus invited to draw a link between the poet and founding father of the nation and the young rapper.

Neto in fact makes an appearance also in this music video, albeit in a more indirect form: as the orphan boy arrives in Luanda, a caption shows him standing on Independence Square, looking at the statue of Neto in the distance, while a rich and apparently arrogant politician drives by in an expensive car and ignores the condition of the child. The juxtaposition of the statue of the original political fighter with its raised fist on the one hand, and the chauffeured aloof post-war politician on the other creates a strong dissonance and raises questions about the legitimacy of the governing powers.

³⁹ Cf. Duke, Lynne: „For Angola's Street Children, the War Isn't Over“, Washington Post, National Weekly Edition, 10-16 July 1995, http://pangaea.org/street_children/africa/angola.htm (accessed 02.10.2016).

⁴⁰ The most polemic accusation of high-level corruption among the Angolan armed forces was formulated by the investigative journalist Rafael Marques in his book *Diamantes de Sangue: Corrupção e Tortura em Angola*, Lisboa: Tinta da China, 2011. Marques was taken to court by a group of generals from the armed forces and charged with defamation. See Smith, David: „Angolan journalist given suspended jail term over blood diamonds book“, The Guardian, May 28th, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/28/angolan-suspended-jail-blood-diamonds-rafael-marques-de-morais> (accessed 02.10.2016).

In sum, „Nzala (Remake)“ functions as an act of remembrance on several levels: musically, lyrically and visually. Although the triumphant memory can still be identified in the chorus’ remake of Kimuezu’s song, or in the flag and Neto’s statue in the music video, this narrative is significantly muffled by the more shameful memory of the civil war, and especially by its ongoing negative consequences, which in the lyrics as well as the music video are attributable to an actual amnesia of the ruling party. Instead of remaining faithful to the socialist values proclaimed by the MPLA during the years of anti-colonial struggle, the postwar government officials seem bent on exploiting the Angolan people and ignoring the poor.

The topic of (willful) amnesia, and thus also of an exclusion of memories from the dominant national narrative, is even more strongly evident in the last example I wish to discuss here. The rap band Fat Soldiers released the song and music video „Eu Recuso-me“ („I Refuse“) in the second half of 2016, as part of a promotional campaign for their new independent album, *Sobreviventes*, which the musicians distributed for free in the streets of Luanda. The band is relatively new in the Angolan rap circuit, and has adopted the classical critical stance of most underground rappers: their songs deal with the problems of poverty and criminality in their neighbourhood, as well as with their dissatisfaction with the Angolan government. „Eu Recuso-me“ combines all these topics: the three rappers denounce the dominant neoliberal discourse of poverty, noticeable especially among the rich elite of Angola (including politicians), which renders poor people victims of their own incompetence. The lyrics focus instead on the ways in which the poor have been dehumanized, instrumentalized and paralyzed by the economic and political system itself, as this sample shows:

The villages, the catacombs of the deepest ghettos
 There lives the poor man whom they call bum
 Turned into an animal sent into the underworld
 With a preformatted mind
 Inert like a corpse
 Political fuel in election times
 He supports his oppressor in spite of the conditions
 With no roof, no bread, no health, education
 He digs his own grave without even noticing
 He buries his future in the form of crumbs
 Carries hunger in his stomach like a medal
 It’s hard to believe, he eats whatever comes
 Cause he lives daily punching knives
 I totally refuse to be poor in those terms
 Showing disobedience and repudiation against this government
 I do not play along with this binge that has been burying us for long
 Which insists on killing the dreams of the sons of the earth

[Chorus:]
 I refuse

I refuse to be poor
In these terms I refuse to be poor
I refuse to be spiritually poor
And suffer in the flesh, dying like a famished person [...]⁴¹

While the lyrics reveal an accusatory and even emancipatory tone that is quite typical of conscious rap, it is especially the music video that enhances the remembrance aspect of the song. The spiritually poor individual depicted in the lyrics features in the video as a series of human characters in chains whose actions are controlled via strings pulled by a man in an eerie clown costume. We witness teachers being bribed, policemen beating up prisoners, judges passing sentences. All of them are inextricably linked to the clown through the strings, their facial features are numb, and their body movements resemble those of dolls. The choice of characters provides a direct reference to daily situations of corruption and abuse of power that are familiar to every Angolan citizen.

The memory aspect is particularly visible in two scenes from the music video. Right in the beginning, we see the clown dragging a dead body – on whose thumb hangs a tag with the inscription „27 Maio“.

The image touches upon one of the darkest episodes of Angola's postcolonial history, the failed coup d'état of May 27th, 1977, which was severely repressed by the MPLA government (with Agostinho Neto in power) and resulted in the imprisonment and execution of thousands of people in and around Luanda⁴². To this day it is unclear how many people were actually killed during the months that followed the event, as the government has never opened an investigation. Until very recently, the theme of May 27th was all but taboo in society, not only because it constituted a painful memory for many families in Luanda, but also, and most importantly, due to the fear that any talk about the topic – and potentially against the government – would end in death. By opening

⁴¹ „As aldeias, as catacumbas dos ghettos mais profundos/ Ali vive o pobre que eles chamam vagabundo/ Feito um animal largado no submundo/ Com uma mente formatada,/ Inerte como um defunto/ Combustível político em época de eleições/ Ele apoia o seu carrasco apesar das condições/ Sem teto, sem pão, sem saúde, educação
Ele cava a própria cova sem ele mesmo ter noção/ Enterra o seu futuro em forma de migalhas/ Carrega no estômago a fome como medalha/ Custa acreditar, ele come quando calha/ Pois vive diariamente dando murros em navalhas/ Eu recuso-me totalmente a ser pobre nesses termos/ Mostrando a desobediência e o repúdio a esse governo/ Não alinho nessa farra que há muito nos enterra/ Que insiste em matar os sonhos dos filhos da terra/ Eu recuso-me/ Eu recuso-me a ser pobre/ Nesses termos eu recuso-me a ser pobre/ Eu recuso-me a ser um pobre de espírito/ E sofrer na carne, morrendo como um faminto.“ Fat Soldiers, „Eu Recuso-me“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmbCZP4uPW0> (accessed 02.10.2016, my transcription and translation).

⁴² The events of the 27th of May and its aftermath are the topic of the recent publication by the Guardian journalist Lara Pawson: *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014. See also Mateus, Dalila Cabrita/ Mateus, Alvaro: *Purga em Angola: O 27 de Maio de 1977*, Lisbon: Texto Editores, 2009.

the music video with this image, Fat Soldiers seem to announce that they not only refuse to be silenced by the category of „poor“, but that they also refuse to collude with the MPLA’s instituted amnesia around this episode of the country’s recent history. The narrative string of the music video – tied, as it is, to the strings in the clown’s hands – leads the audience to connect this image with a later one of the judge passing a sentence under the influence of the clown.

In the context of recent political events in Angola, it is difficult not to read this image as the very „circus show“ that the 17 political activists publicly deemed their trial to be on March 2016. It is also worth remembering that the activists were tried precisely under the accusation of plotting a coup d’état, and immediately upon their imprisonment memories of May 27th resurfaced not only in the web’s social media and the country’s few independent media outlets, but even in the President’s speech to the central committee of the MPLA, in which he announced, rather enigmatically: „We cannot allow the Angolan people to be submitted to another dramatic situation like the one it lived through on May 27th, 1977, because of a coup d’état“⁴³. The ghosts of May 27th have thus returned in full force. Even if the outcome of the persecution of political activists in present-day Angola assumes a different shape, the basic injustice of their imprisonment is reminiscent of the brutal force with which the MPLA has crushed its opponents in the past. Like MCK’s song discussed above, „Eu Recuso-me“ uses memory in order to point an accusatory finger at the corrupt governance of the country. For this purpose, and again like „Nzala (Remake)“, the music video resorts to a shameful moment of the nation’s recent history, thus shattering the positive self-image favoured by the government.

In all three songs, then, images, texts and symbols are (re-)activated as a means of contrasting a positive national self-image with the many ills of contemporary Angolan society. As Jan Assmann suggested, the very recourse to a past heritage allows the Angolan nation to regard itself as a community; however, the versions of the past that are favoured in the rap songs discussed here can be very much at odds with the official political discourse. This reminds us of the value of „countermemories“ which, according to Aleida Assmann, tend indeed to dig out excluded moments from a community’s archives as a means of re-evaluating its collective identity⁴⁴. The focus on exclusion varies from artist to artist. Kid MC’s song and video very much emphasize the triumphant struggle of the anti-colonial period while referring to the current problems of the nation rather obliquely. MCK and Paulo Flores, on the other hand, retain some elements of that foundational moment, but mix it with the more negatively charged memory of the civil war and its consequences. Finally, Fat Soldiers focus almost exclusively on aspects of the young nation’s problematic history (the coup of May

⁴³ Quoted in Ndomba, Borralho „Presidente reage à prisão dos activistas lembrando o 27 de Maio“, Rede Angola, July 2, 2015, <http://www.redeangola.info/jose-eduardo-santos-reage-prisao-dos-activistas/> (accessed 02.10.2016, my translation).

⁴⁴ Assmann, Aleida „Memory, Individual and Collective“, *op.cit.*, p. 217.

27th happened only two years after Angola attained independence) in order to link it to today's environment of political repression. We could almost say that the degree to which the songs and music videos highlight shameful memories reveals the ultimate positioning of the artists vis-à-vis the dominant political discourse. Still, independent of their political stance and affiliations, all artists presented here use collectively shared texts, images and symbols as a rhetorical strategy: first of all they hereby mark their membership to the imagined community of the Angolan nation; on top of that they perform a kind of corrective role, indicating the possibility of not only reviving memories, but also re-interpreting them in a new light.

Conclusion: A view of Angola from the trenches of the mind

During the celebration of Angola's 40th anniversary on November 11th 2015, President José Eduardo dos Santos gave an official speech that predictably celebrated the achievements of his party and the government, while omitting less pleasant aspects of Angola's recent political tensions. As more critical reporters were quick to observe⁴⁵, a considerable portion of the President's speech during this occasion, as well as at the opening of MPLA's congress on August 2016, took the beaten track of praising the MPLA for its great achievements during the anti-colonial liberation struggle. This extreme focus on what is recognized by most Angolans as a positive memory worth reviving⁴⁶ has not only the function of elevating the MPLA to the commonly defended position of the nation's benevolent parent. It also serves as a strategy to brush aside less comfortable memories concerning internal strife within the party itself as well as the still unhealed wounds of a civil war that lasted 27 years. Finally, the reminder of the ruling party's historical achievements can serve as a barrier to discussions of more pressing problems of the nation, including the vociferous presence of a small group of activists who claim to continue the real revolutionary work initiated by their forefathers, and by implication the MPLA itself.

Rap music finds a fertile ground to explore such tensions and act as a corrective. Because as a genre it positions itself on the margins, rap can assume a more critical perspective that clashes with the mainstream. The notion of „trenches of the mind“, borrowed from MCK's first album *Trincheira de Ideias*, conveys this attitude of rappers particularly clearly. As voluntary outsiders, they reserve for themselves the right to regard Angolan society and especially its

⁴⁵ Cf. Gomes, Miguel: „A história enquanto eixo de legitimação do poder político“, Rede Angola, August 18, 2016, <http://www.redeangola.info/especiais/historia-enquanto-eixo-de-legitimacao-do-poder-politico/> (accessed 02.10.2016).

⁴⁶ See particularly the extraordinary effort of a group of film makers and historians to collect the testimonials of Angolans who participated in the liberation struggle into a documentary entitled *Trilhos* („Tracks“), which came out in 2015 to celebrate the 40th independence anniversary.

governance less sympathetically. From their underground position – enhanced by a strong circuit of unofficial music distribution through street peddlers – they can produce and spread ideas that would potentially be rejected by the ruling powers. Additionally, the image of the trenches encapsulates the sense of ongoing warfare that still permeates Angolan society on many levels. Serious criticism of the government and polemic political debates are strongly discouraged from entering the public sphere under the threat of triggering another civil war, thus potentially keeping the population at large more compliant. For Angola's politically engaged rappers, however, it is precisely this compliance that needs to be broken in order to usher in social change. While the government uses the memory of triumph over colonialism and the successful end of a civil war to give the semblance of a successful nation, the more critical voices in rap re-activate memories of the governing power's incompetence, brutality or willful unwillingness to act in a just way. In such an environment of 'memory wars' on a cultural level, we can clearly recognize the importance of products like rap music as one of the chief weapons of expression for the generation born after 1975. Like the nation's musicians and poets of the 1960s, also these artists are bent on producing a more fitting version of an Angolan collective identity that reflects their actual experiences and expectations. And so the saga continues indeed.

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